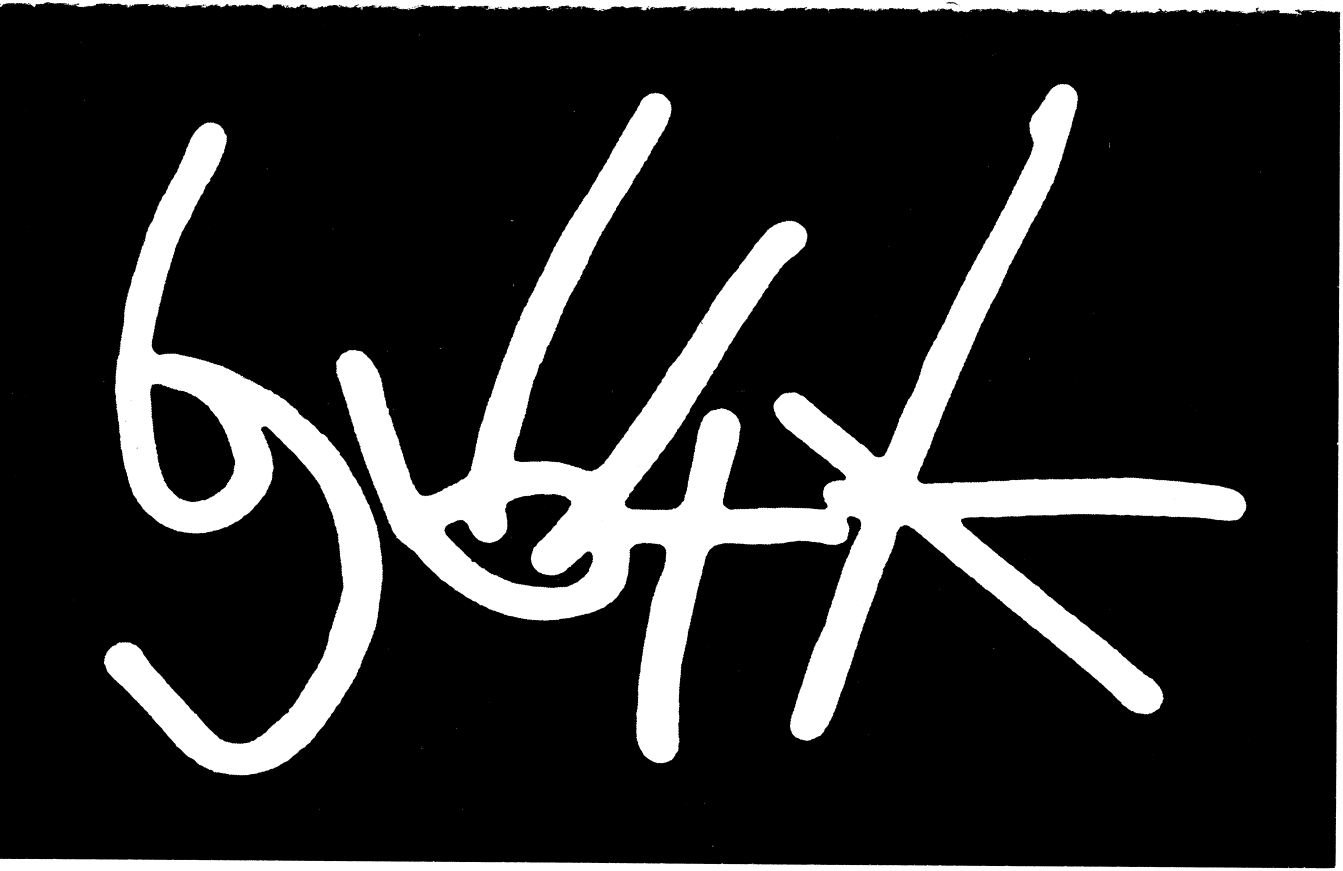

Boot Boyz Biz (BBB)

Boot Boyz Biz is a "research and production worker cooperative" founded by Kevin McCaughey, which collectively designs and proudly self-produces bootleg T-shirts as a form of creating and disseminating research. The shirts, whose subjects range from Cocteau Twins to "Cybernetic Serendipity," Roland Barthes to Björk, are covered in obscure graphics and dense typography creating layers of connection and meaning. The intricate designs require reading rather than viewing, challenging the conventions of graphic shirts and pushing the limits of traditional bootlegs. Since its inception, the brand has evolved to incorporate elements of politics, education, and spirituality, reimagining the potential of bootlegs as a form of "education through images." Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: Could you talk about the beginning of Boot Boyz Biz? What inspired the project, and what was your relationship to bootlegs at the time?

BBB: Experiences that built a base for our practice today were percolating long before we formally start-

ed the project. I can trace BBB's beginning to a triad of formative phases: 1. File Sharing, 2. Punk Tees, and 3. Artist Books.

The bootleg impulse first revealed itself to me while I was learning the dark art of CD burning in middle school. Getting hooked on making and trading mixes anticipated the kind of "mixtape mentality" or "dragonfly eye" that guides our ways of seeing today. The mix as an object has utility in the discovery of new tunes, but it also sparks intense perceptions of time and place stemming from the context of the exchange. The mixtape "event" integrates the material and immaterial as memories are burned onto the disc, as are mp3s, making for a complex aesthetic object (basically space-time travel) and an important component of convivial cultural exchange.

More early obsessions with music led to online activity: creating Blogspot "music blogs" and using the p2p network Soulseek, opening the door for experiencing new modes of infinite free exchange. By excavating well-organized folders on Soulseek, you could find shortcuts into expansive music histories, while peeking into a specific user's library revealed a kind of world-view in mp3s.

Meanwhile, offline, my closet was increasingly corresponding to my iTunes collection. Most of the short-lived 1980s punk/hardcore bands I was into never had real merch, so it was up to bootleggers to fill a void as demand increased from an accelerated (re)discovery of relatively obscure music, partially due to file-sharing culture (big up ebay user: negativereinforcement and eatdeath.com). Tees and punk (or any music/subculture) are seemingly forever symbiotic. Tees satisfy an individual desire for unalienated belonging while simultaneously preserving and

reproducing the scene itself. The internet eliminated dependency on local shops, exploding choices and access to symbolic capital. I learned from digging for boots online that a shop's stash of commodities (online or IRL) becomes doubly useful as an encyclopedia, where each tee becomes a visual-mnemonic fragment that maps onto a larger landscape of underground music.

Tees get more interesting at gigs where they act as foregrounds and backgrounds for the show. Their collective formation in space makes a visible soundtrack, bridging the historical and present through a shuffling inventory of shirt-signs. The temperament of any gig correlates with what tees are present—forming constellations of meaning and tension. Often revealed by the tees, the most memorable gigs show an amorphous unity of differences (see: Chaos in Tejas 2011) opposed to ones clearly bent toward a single ideology. This best vibe is brought out by bands with diverse ranges of influences or gigs booked with eclectic lineups where contact with the other is built into the program. More than a fruitful blueprint for curation, the lesson is that by fostering a diverse range of inputs, the potentials increase for creating new meaningful connections. This ideal translates into how we assemble topics and ideas for BBB collections today.

Studying graphic design brought awareness to punk's earlier 20th-century analogs found within the historical avant-garde, where, like punk, new collective consciousness was fostered by modes of radical making focused on transforming images of everyday life into new critical forms. Dada montage and constructivism added a historical spark to the cut and paste fanzines I was grinding out at Kinkos late into the night. The

historical trail illuminated more evidence: Breton's "one publishes to find comrades," clandestine activity in "samizdat" publishing, non-linear storytelling in *Medium is the Massage*, the deconstructive "book in a box" *Aspen* magazine, the convivial correspondence in 1960s Mail Art, and potentials of the collector in Ed Ruscha's artist books. These historical images screamed almost explicitly "bootleg" as they used assemblage with emphasis on the public-making "multiple," revealing strategies for inquiry-based projects that now leave an invisible ink on our work.

These histories initially inspired a fervor of (mostly non-serious) Riso publishing activity (produced under the moniker Nonporous) from around 2013–2016 — concurrent with the excitement around Printed Matter Art Book Fair stuff. Then it became clear that tees (totes too) and books were becoming increasingly symmetrical as desired objects in the zine scene. Tees reward a more instantly gratifying cultural capital to the buyer and give an economic boost to recoup the low-margins in publishing, but they're often designed as a modest supplement or a means to an end. Then we thought: if tees provoke a heightened desire, instead of using them as bait for getting eyes on zines, why not make the tees the zines themselves? By taking the industrious reproductive activity of the risograph into the realm of screen printing tees, the task was then to pack as many ideas into a T-shirt as we would into a sixteen-page zine, merging the means and ends into a single cohesive expression.

Through understanding the value of open cultural exchange within a DIY ethic, and possessing

p. 203: Boot Boyz Biz NYC Earth Art T-Shirt (2019)

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RISO
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BOOT BOYZ
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knowledge of radical publishing strategies, we were able to lay the foundation for the project.

> BS: How do you decide what to bootleg? What variables are you conscious of when making bootlegs: i.e. power dynamics, different cultures, economies, contexts, etc.?

BBB: Above all we boot what charges us up, what expands our understanding of the world, and what gives us courage to continue creative work. Instinctively it's a matter of real-recognize-real. When you find something that moves you emotionally or intellectually, there's an impulse to pass it on. Think of Newton's Third Law but with ideas. Competitive ideology suppresses the urge to share what's valuable and Web 2.0 exploits it while trivializing it. Our process starts by collecting material that makes us move, then it becomes a matter of mapping the personal onto our larger social context. We're always seeking the largest overlap between what we like and what could be useful to the widest range of peers both today and for posterity. The task is to create value by filling gaps.

We adopt a rhizomatic temperament permitting us to wrestle with multiplicities of form and thought throughout history—an inverted version of the "lifestyle" concept. The output of most brands appears as a single homogenous "totality," where our individual projects each contain unique heterogenous *totalities* within a constraint of the 16×20" printing pallet. This freedom of thought (onto a limited space) gives us a large scope to organize and put history in motion. We

p. 204: Boot Boyz Biz Riso Gocco hat (2022)

look to historical flash points across all disciplines that reveal moments of counter-hegemonic rupture. By capturing sparks from the past we hope to energize the present. What kind of sparks? Ones that advocate for free, meaningful activity within communities, and ones that help us unravel the psyche of history. Our project aims to bump threads and keep ideas at the top of feeds. We can only change the world if we increasingly understand it together.

We think: What stories do we need to vitally argue for today? What thinkers might be just below the surface to a large group of people? Are we being constructive towards an open and collaborative society by nudging specific topics? What pathways are available to make a potent idea both legible and complex? Do we have enough understanding to effectively translate an idea?

We boot what others won't. We know there's inspiration tucked away in remote institutions/disciplines that have potential to benefit a wider audience. We try to demystify these ideas and reverse radical monopolies. Alternatively, we like fishing out ideas baked into pop-culture that are often missed or dismissed. Magic happens when these high and low worlds bump into each other, and we're especially drawn to ideas that dance between both.

We have principals that draw from a common sense "boot-code" (i.e., considering out-of-print status, if sources are living or dead, active or inactive) but we deliberately stretch its limitations (mostly in terms of accepted form and selection) because we believe the task of any new generation is to make traditions anew. We use this instinctual compass while keeping in mind the explicit (but somewhat slippery) Fair Use doctrine, giving us a benchmark for producing transformative

works. Fair Use favors the usage of fragments from existing works, and we find a home in these fragments which we can salvage from relative obscurity. When we put fragments in careful sequence, we can correlate stories using image and text in kaleidoscopic form, inviting opportunities for discovery, new appreciation, and increased subjectivity. What is inquiry-based visual communication if not criticism, comment, reporting, and teaching?

We acknowledge the very real tension between a co-optive, cynical "booting from above" and a supportive, convivial "booting from below." We associate with the latter as our practice has stayed DIY and independent from the start, but that fact alone doesn't automatically clear one from doing damage. Bootlegging becomes dangerous in two main ways: banalizing and occulting. Banalization happens by fetishizing history, reproducing stereotypes, atrophying memory by distilling it into rigid icons, calcifying thought (think Che tees or any tees that prioritize appearance over substance). We fight this by arranging constellations of unusual images that crisscross disciplines and timelines, exploding history into pathways that require deeper readings. Instead of worshiping history, we put it up for question. Occulting practices take historical images and re-mystify them devoid of context and history, for sole aesthetic benefit of the occulter, resulting in a less legible and mystified environment. While we let graphics on our projects speak for themselves, we combat occultation by presenting extended roadmaps of our research, showing our hand and leaving the puzzle pieces that make up our work open to all, to promote expanded inquiry and meaning-making. Booting for us is not an act of enclosure but a gesture of "giving-on-and-with" (Édouard Glissant).

As we've become more popular, we've oriented ourselves deeper and deeper into the cracks of history for insights for material, because honest bootlegging can't be a day at the beach. We push ourselves to up the level of visual transformation by syncretizing increasingly disparate-but-connected elements, so that a design is never about only one thing. A tee becomes a cosmology, a salad of pictures, and a web of knowledge with multiple entry and exit points into enriching stories.

The topics, ideas, and images we engage with are priceless, what you're paying for is our labor to organize and produce the things and keep it going. Material growth isn't part of the program.

BS: How has your understanding of a bootleg changed over the course of the project? It feels like very early on, the project was a more traditional form of bootlegging (thinking here of the one-off music related shirts). Recently it retains those elements of fandom, but the releases are pushing the potential of what a bootleg can do or be—resurfacing ideologies, educating, et cetera. I am interested in this evolution.

BBB: Yeah in the beginning the main influence was punk boots so there was little constellation going on, the tees were standard fare often about one thing. Back then even imagining a non-music boot on a colorful blank felt sacrilegious! But once you sidestep dogma and try something new and actually it hits.... going back feels increasingly one dimensional.

p. 209: Boot Boyz Biz O(+> / Prince T-shirt (2019)

spontaneous sensation
HD
Int. Cl.: 16
Prior U.S. Cl.: 38
United States Patent and Trademark Office
Reg. No. 1,871,900
Registered Jan. 3, 1995
TRADEMARK
PRINCIPAL REGISTER
Prince
BUMPER STICKERS AND STICKERS, IN CLASS 16 (U.S. CL. 38). FIRST USE 3-1-1992. IN COMMERCE 3-1-1992.
SN 74-340,333, FILED 12-28-1992
GERALD C. SEEGARS EXAMINING ATTORNEY
AN INFINITY
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Boot Boyz Biz
TRACES
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2015–17: Bootlegs are a personal, social tool
2017–19: Bootlegs are a personal, social, educational tool
2019–21: Bootlegs are a personal, social, educational, political tool
2022–??: Bootlegs are a personal, social, educational, political, spiritual tool

Our oscillation of research and production continues to propel us in unexpected directions. Now might be approaching a point where it's a misnomer to call what we do bootleg. The word mainly indicates our departure from punk bootlegs, but we've since gone through a transformative turn (bootlegs-without-bootlegging?). The project has become more complex and hard to pin down over time because of a few things:

1. The topics we wrestle with often make use of intertextual strategies themselves (sampling, collecting, montage, publishing, et cetera) across all different disciplines (film, philosophy, music, et cetera). So as we continue to learn from our "bootleg ancestors," it gives us the courage to push and experiment.

2. The embracing of a "horizontal montage" design strategy in order to converge aesthetic, intellectual, political, and spiritual energies together like a time-lapse photo. The comprehensive strategy aims to bridge languages to show a bigger picture. We try to work this into objects (when the space affords it!) and have it shine through the "group" style presentations.

p. 210: Boot Boyz Biz Koyaanisqatsi pants (2019)

3. The more visible we get the greater the pull is to make the work more transformative and unarguably fair use.

> BS: How do you feel about the T-shirt as a medium? Would you consider these T-shirts publications? Exhibitions? What inspired you to create other objects?

BBB: I love tees. They're basically memes. Tees, they put people at ease. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. Tees link and make us think. They make you wanna buy a stranger a drink. A tee is both a personal joy and a public utility. A thing to start thoughts. A comrade and conductor of electricity. Closets are memory palaces and what's worn in crowds is ideology made visible (sometimes sweet, other times horrifying). Tees shape habits. A weak metamorphosis. Tees are funny complex things because they integrate the subject-object divide. "Are you wearing the tee or is the tee wearing you?" It's both at the same time, and this creative mimesis excites the imagination. "What's that shirt? And who are you?" Design lays traps that put people on new paths. Between the home and out in the world, tees leave a wake of aesthetic experience within everyday life, allowing for infinite creative potential.

What do tees do? They embody thought for a wearer and make contact with a viewer resulting in various levels of attraction, repulsion, or indifference. But they are also everywhere and add to the visual pollution that overwhelms our daily senses, so indifference is often the most practical response. To make effective contact with others, the familiar graphic tee needs to become strange again through

an oscillation of distraction and concentration. Design strategies that defamiliarize images from the past into new poetic forms (mood sculptures) can jolt viewers and awaken sleepers into active modes of perception. For visual communication to transform/subvert thought and stick in the mind (like all good art, memes, film, et cetera) it must be all at once familiar, strange, and wonderful.

Tees act medicinally by converging reason and entertainment, where poetic visible language becomes a chaser, allowing for big ideas to go down easier. I think of Barthes' idea in *The Pleasure of the Text* that distinguishes instantly gratifying texts ("Pleasure") with challenging transformational texts ("Bliss"). Generic bootlegs could be seen as self-gratifying and hedonistic, while our aim is to bring both pleasure *and* challenge the position of a subject towards new thought: Booter's Delight.

McLuhan points out that clothing is a technological extension of the skin, so are tees then more like embodied capital rather than objective cultural capital? There's something deeply psychological about a "second skin." Any modification in cultural capital (including what you wear) changes both consciousness and unconsciousness, and empowers or depowers people for better or worse (like a sigil). The outward effect is that tees edit the social-visible landscape with a potential to produce collective consciousness. I'm interested in learning more from the historical ur-tees, like tattooing and heraldry.

Tees are players in urban semiotics as moving texts—they map perceptions and animate thought. Graphics are energy and flow where the tee goes. Love at last sight. Tees can help our environment to be more vibrant, exciting, convivial, spontaneous. The task:

Make contact. If tees are a contemporary form of communication, we can aid a counter-public sphere with charged up graphics. Tees sometimes get hit with a negative value judgment but wise people respect all forms by which knowledge is communicated. Part of growing is dismantling black and white distinctions between mediums, disciplines, et cetera. It's always more fruitful to find overlaps than uphold divisions.

We see the tees' affinities with many mediums: posters, exhibitions, zines, essays, films, libraries, music, et cetera. and with disciplines like archeology, library science, exhibition design, publishing, journalism, translation, et cetera. Its root is in the creative act. Furthermore, why should there be a distinction between T-shirts, classroom presentations, podcasts, YouTube videos, wikis, et cetera. that heavily rely on reference material? If all of teaching is now a commodity (bought and paid for), why should there be a distinction between what's shown in a classroom and what's on a T-shirt or a website? And why should exclusive commodified education be privileged in its use of copyrighted material?

Though our tees themselves are scarce, the images that make them up are infinitely reproducible. (See ours and make it anew!) Plus you can get most of the thought value from our projects without buying anything! Boots circulate the city as well as the internet, living two different time-space realities at once, which complement and enhance each other. As a part of practical culture, tees are accessible with high visibility, so when they work, they make good traps for spreading ideas. Tees work best when they remain in circulation. When the boots keep working we keep working.

p. 215: Boot Boyz Biz Affiche throw blanket (2022)

S TOGETHER
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Exercices de Style
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Club Livre
100 Million Covers
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Kinetic Unfolding

Thoughtful boots can invert the advertising tactics that manufacture false needs by tapping into a new creative function of "mimetic desire." Boots then could create new demand for "wish images" that would be inspiration for a better future.

> BS: What are your thoughts on bootlegging in the design world? You've had a big impact on the "bootleg craze". Do you feel designers recognize the potency of the gesture, or has the proliferation of the visual language reduced its power?

BBB: With the proliferation of image sharing online and mood-board dependency, it's clear that bootlegging is in accord with our epoch. It's becoming increasingly clear to younger generations that copyright law has never been there to protect artists, and only to benefit the distributors and gatekeepers (almost never the artists themselves) who have a monopoly on reproduction and extract rent. The confusion and taboo around bootlegging is largely due to misconceptions conflating pre-digital property rights with intellectual property.

I don't think we can take credit for any craze, but we may have started during the height of one. With any opportunity, some see a potential for participatory action while others see clout and dollar signs. There's definitely a lot of half-assed boots out there that look like someone's passive income strategy. To show some militancy: If you're not printing your own boots, you should do something else. Urgently, the childish "self-help" function of T-shirt consumption needs to be exchanged for a will to

p. 216: Boot Boyz Biz Faucheux Book Club sweatshirt (2022)

build and participate in non-sectarian communities of inquiry and practice. Be a *passeur* not a poser.

> BS: Do you have thoughts about why bootlegging has become so popular lately? In the design community, but also beyond, with corporations like Gucci embracing the act despite prosecuting bootleggers?

BBB: It's popular because it's cheaper and easier than ever to make anything, especially tees. You likely won't have to take on any debt either. Access to screen-printing, space for managing inventory, labor, et cetera. is no longer necessary nor a barrier for entry. Have a boot idea? Upload graphics, take pre-orders, and have a service fulfill the orders. But not without atrophying a designer's integrity and sense of responsibility. Unless you make something yourself, you have a very limited understanding of how it functions. "If you're going to live outside the law you have to be honest" (Bob Dylan).

Corporations understand sign value and the fact that the value of an image (logo, product, et cetera.) is only increased through its reproduction in space. These big brands realized it's more profitable to embrace bootlegs instead of prosecuting because the products (inaccessible to most people) circulating in public generates brand recognition and signals a brand loyalty among communities who couldn't normally afford their product. The build up of clout is later converted into real dollars when the population buys the brands official, but more affordable products (where these companies get most of their revenue)—wallets, belts, perfumes, socks et cetera.

BS: Could you talk about the relationship between bootlegging and community? Both bootlegging's role in creating as well as preserving communities? I am thinking here of fan communities (those that receive the objects), but also the community of people creating and producing the bootlegs.

BBB: There's two types of people—people who love and acknowledge being shaped by other ideas, and people who refuse to admit they're inspired by anything other than themselves. The former is a prerequisite for a meaningful building of community, and the latter perpetuates the anti-social cult of "genius" and us vs. them attitudes.

Communities are tied together by symbols and institutions. The reproduction of images, often through traditions, are a necessary faculty for maintaining stability within any community. Images speak of cultural memory, and apply it to life, signifying what people and groups value (folk art). You see bootleg tees having a significant role in reproducing music scenes and have an institutional role (our logical starting point). Bootlegs can be issued to signal membership in a closed off community, so we want to agitate this by nudging people toward unfamiliar images that make identity unstable and fuzzy.

BS: Could you talk about the relationship between bootlegging and archiving?

BBB: Derrida's "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this cri-

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terion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation" is big for us. The increasing amount of boots moving through space make for a new decentralized archive sponsored by an invisible college (Bootheads) making wisdom visible.

In the age of infinite reproduction (scanning, printing, photography, file sharing, et cetera), archival material longs to explode from strictures of space and time. The Good Booter in the Age of Infinite Reproduction lights fires and looks to the Burning Bush miracle: cultural material is illuminated by new energies in the present while its sources remain preserved, unscathed, if not strengthened. The potential of booting is fruitful only if the object remains in circulation, as its primary function is to create events and not art objects (exhibition value over cult value).

Think of an archive as a city, and think of the city as an archive where its streets are living language. Tees participate in that language by activating thought and social contact in everyday life. We take a stab at reorienting "the archive" through our projects that move ideas outside their hiding places and into streets and spaces like carrier pigeons intensifying neighborhoods into peer-to-peer spaces; meanwhile their traces float around the web's labyrinth—making sparks fly across space-time.

Preservation by power is often practiced by a kind of "closing off" that prevents creative flourishing to most; this is strange when you realize an idea or object is only preserved in "the now" by its reproduction and connections within everyday life. Walter Benjamin wrote, "Every present is determined by those images that are synchronic with it." So if an image is not circulating well, it's basically dead, and

most archives and their constituents are stuck. Since top-down hegemonic institutions often give us narrow insights in jurassic forms, we have to organize an alternative network of citations into a new "useable past" that's less about preserving what "is" (mostly bad), and more about redeeming ideas that are increasingly missing from popular attention, then putting them in motion using participatory mediums for today.

Archiving (and bootlegging) to us is close to how T.J. Demos described the Otolith Group: "recovering the living potentiality of dreams that would have seem to have died decades ago." Along with this we also want to carefully exorcize what John Dana in 1917 called "the Gloom of the Museum," by making theories popular, not walling them off from public life for a private few's benefit ("experts," museum goers, powerful interests), who are often only interested to artificially increase an object's cultural value for later conversion into economic value. The old archive uses history as a hallowed investment strategy while concealing its liberatory potential as a public toolbox for collective reflection into action. A consequence of busting the museum/archive could be the realization that much of the dominant culture's current and future archives are mostly useless for public wellbeing, so we have to look elsewhere for recovering what could be useful for building a better world without exploitation, suppression, and alienation.

Everyone has their own archive of "objects in space" and "images in the mind" from which they draw to understand and participate in the world. Not unlike the historical "Commonplace book," our index of projects composes an archive of inspiration that guides a strategic perspective. The continuous

process of collecting and fragmenting, i.e. "taking a page from someone else's book" is at the core of mimesis and creative growth. By reproducing our work in multiples, the "pages" from our archive are readied to leap from our archive and shuffle into others self-constructed archives. Even adding one new card to one's deck will modify and update the whole. If people depend on the objects and ideas laying around to make decisions, our projects lend themselves as fragments of living memory suited for a new kind of "open archive" of creative energies. This simple reciprocity of "giving-on-and-with" (Glissant again) is what extends the life of ideas and objects.

Some say we're entering a dark age of archiving due to the dematerialization of everything, so printed items can combat this a little by constituting a new doxographic resource (a compendium of a variety of intellectual views).

BS: What is the future of bootlegs?

BBB: Education through images will only increase, but there will be a continued fight from IP holders to wall people off from knowledge (until we pay up). As history becomes increasingly available via digitization and new means of reproduction emerge, we can expect an increase of creative acts in the spirit of "bootlegging," taking all kinds of forms and qualities.

It feels like positive attitudes towards transformative reuse are becoming more wide-spread. Maybe due to a growing observation that creatives need to make "content" to survive, and some of what's around and most useful wrestles with historical content and its impact on today. (BBB is just IRL "posting" by the way).

Tees will stay important as a pastime for both enthusiasts and slower moving subcultures but will fall in-and-out of the dominant trend cycles. As we age into an increasingly precarious world, tees and bootlegs make us complacent and take us back to "more pleasant times" but we have to resist reactionary nostalgia (or at least make productive use of it by forging new meaning) and make new connections with the past to flourish in the present! In other words, a boot can't just be a window into the past, but needs to illuminate pathways toward something fresh.

Title page (p. 198): Graphic from the Boot Boyz Biz Björk Violently Happy T-shirt